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Question Time: Cuban vacation - Part II

A reader responds to last week's question

By Rob Burgess
Tribune night editor

[**Editor's note:** In last week's edition of Question Time, we discussed the recently proposed dissolution of the United States' decades-old embargo of Cuba. After it was published, I received the following letter from a local reader with a fair amount of experience with the topic.]

"Dear Mr. Burgess — Your article on Cuba was interesting. I find myself drawn to any article on this very beautiful country. I was very fortunate in the summer of 2013 to receive a Lilly Endowment Teacher Creativity grant, with the specific proposal of visiting Cuba while it was still difficult to visit, because of U.S. restrictions and an embargo that was still firmly in place. I had always wanted to visit since my high school Spanish teacher talked lovingly about the country she left behind in 1961. I was curious to see a very different political structure and ideology in place, and I wanted to visit a country that was not so greatly influenced by the United States. I went there in June of 2013. I started in Havana and went across the entire nation with a final stopping point in the city of Santiago. And I think I was there in the nick of time before major changes will take place.

“It was beautiful, charming, and a very friendly country. It was not touched by American chain restaurants or expensive American hotel chains. As a country and culture, they were not driven by the Internet. And almost no one had a cell phone. People were actually talking with one another, face to face. It truly was like walking into 1960 in many ways. A few years ago, The Today Show did a day devoted to Cuba. One thing that was mentioned was that there are U.S. architectural firms just waiting to revamp and ‘improve’ downtown Havana when the embargo is lifted. I fear that the charm and beauty of the country will go away, replaced by structures and areas that will look very ‘vanilla,’ and that malls with all the chain store names we recognize, will pop up everywhere.

“One person who responded to your questions was worried about safety. I have never felt safer in my travels than when I was in Cuba. There is very little crime. Before I left for Cuba, I had a number of people asking me whether I could safely get into the country, or whether I would be able to get back out after being there. ‘Aren't you afraid?’ was a question I got from several people, too. Most people thought that the Cuban government didn't want us there, when in fact it was our government with the travel restrictions.

“Those restrictions that are still in place include the fact that Americans cannot ‘vacation’ at resorts. Americans must still participate in cultural, educational trips where you visit schools, ballet troupes, senior citizen

centers, cultural centers, etc. It is called 'People to People' travel, and it is still all that Americans can do legally, even though the President has loosened the licensing process to go there. We may still be a few years away from 'vacations.'

"One of your other respondents referred to wanting to see the old cars as the main reason to go. They were fascinating to see and ride in when taking a cab, but they are there because auto imports came to a screeching halt in about 1960. Some have seen better days, and some are in mint condition, but they simply are one small part of the mix that is Cuba.

"Of all your respondents, Pedro Velazco hit it squarely on the head. If a lifting of the trade embargo makes all that is Cuba go away, then the country will lose all that is interesting and wonderful. We happened onto a baseball rally in the City of Santa Clara. The Villa Clara team was playing against Matanzas for the national championship. The fans are fans for the right reasons. It was refreshing to see baseball where the players deserve to be heroes, and BIG money was not calling the shots. There was no 'doping,' just baseball in its purest form.

"If we lift the embargo and things change beyond recognition, will the Cuban people really be the winners? The embargo should be lifted to give the Cuban people more opportunity. If we allow the Cuban people to still manage their own affairs in their own way, and give them more opportunity, we will have a wonderful place to continue visiting and the Cuban people

will have a country they still recognize, and we will have a true friend in this ever more complicated world. But, I can say with the greatest enthusiasm, if you have the opportunity to go before it becomes just another vacation spot — and hopefully it won't — do so. It was the trip of a lifetime!”

— **Fred M. Henderson**

Tipton

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